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## Is narcissism undermining critical reflection in our business schools?

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## **QUESTIONS BUSINESS SCHOOLS DON'T ASK**

### **IS NARCISSISM UNDERMINING CRITICAL REFLECTION IN OUR BUSINESS SCHOOLS?**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper connects with claims that our students are struggling with critical reflection. We propose that hampering critical reflection is a form of narcissism, which we define using Ovid's classical myth. Narcissus' errors highlight the risks of non-critical reflection, involving the deceptions of familiarity and the appropriation of meaning. Narcissus' journey from reflection to critical reflection triggers an ethical crisis; but for us, such a journey can be a spur to reflexivity, emphasising the contingency of our knowledge claims and the ethics of our presence in the world. Woven through our discussion is the theme of power. Narcissus' initially naïve reflection incorporates the power to control meaning, and he proves incapable of relinquishing control over others to develop greater control over himself. We call for a softening of the distinctions in the management literature between (individual/psychological) reflection and (relational/political) critical reflection, arguing that our exploration of narcissism reveals the political-in-the-personal. We present practical suggestions for the classroom, including how to explain critical reflection to students and what pitfalls to avoid when reviewing and giving feedback on the work of others. These ideas have particular applicability to peer learning approaches, but also have relevance for the teaching and role-modelling of leadership.

Key words: critical reflection; reflection; narcissism; power; self-leadership; reflexivity; peer learning; ethics

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL**

Critical reflection is a term for a range of approaches that wield considerable pedagogical influence in Western business schools and management learning in general (Bailin et al., 1999; Ennis, 1962; Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Rigg and Trehan, 2008). Together with communication skills, critical reflection seems to represent a set of transferable competences that translate readily across the academic to business context divide, and are therefore attractive from an employability perspective (Bennett et al., 1999; Jones, 2007). Critical reflection has been hailed as a crucial leadership competency for our increasingly complex and unstable organizational worlds (Cunliffe, 2009; Smith, 2003), where working with multiplicity and contradiction is vital for leadership as sense-making (Weick, 1995), the management of meaning (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) and the navigation of change (Vince, 2002). Critical reflection is also considered key to efforts to challenge the dominance of instrumentalism and open up other ways of thinking about organisational life, incorporating ethical, moral and political dimensions (Reynolds, 1998).

Although critical reflection appears on many business school curricula, it is far from clear what it actually entails, leading one commentator to refer to its “unbearable vagueness” (Vandermensbrughe, 2004:417). There are several possible interpretations of the term ‘critical’, and the practices and values of critical reflection manifest with a range of different emphases. Sometimes the word ‘critical’ is used with specific reference to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Johnson and Duberley, 2000); at other times, it is used more loosely to refer to approaches with a little extra ‘edge’. Thus, a management studies course which claims to nurture critical reflection might focus on the application of logic; the evaluation of evidence; the construction of argument; the examination of power, authority and revolt; the opportunity for student-centred or experiential learning; and/or the values of exploration, multiplicity and open-mindedness.

Mingers (2000) proposes a framework for management education, which sees critical reflection as four kinds of scepticism - towards rhetoric, tradition, authority and objectivity - each of which carries distinct epistemological and political affiliations

and implications. Focusing less on scepticism and more on compliance, Bailin et al. (1999) see critical reflection as a normative enterprise, equipping those who acquire critical skills with expertise in the standards, heuristics and discourses that are considered mainstream at a particular point in time. Thus, definitions are not only varied, they are also sometimes seemingly contradictory.

An interesting contradictory impulse in definitions of critical reflection is the interplay between selfhood/singularity and difference/multiplicity. For instance, Paul and Elder (2000) argue that the exercise of critical skills involves self-direction, self-discipline, self-monitoring and self-correcting, that is, that critical reflection is about developing and nurturing autonomy. Autonomy seems to be the main goal of critical reflection in many of the more practice-orientated texts, but this focus has been criticised in academic quarters for trivialising critique (Papastephanou, 2004) and undermining attempts to work towards justice and ethics in organisational life (Biesta and Stams, 2001; Papastephanou and Angeli, 2007).

A contrasting view is offered by those who see critical reflection as fundamentally concerned with multiplicity, that is, with the acknowledgement and tolerance that several ideas, versions and perspectives can exist concurrently without one having to rule out another. As Jones (2007:91) argues, critical reflection introduces an element of otherness: "This means firstly seeking other evidence, other voices and other perspectives. It is also a bigger project as it aims to develop students' openness to other ways of seeing the world and so is both directed at the evidence or task at hand but also directed at students' worldviews". This emphasis on otherness involves living with contradiction and ambivalence; avoiding premature closure; and not taking things for granted. In a sense, it suggests that a scepticism towards singularity and certainty is what underpins the other forms of scepticism in Minger's (2000) framework.

This distinction between selfhood/singularity and difference/multiplicity can be traced in discussions of reflection as an individual activity (as in the 'reflective practitioner', Schön, 1983) versus reflection as a collective, relational and organizing process (Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Vince, 2002). This is sometimes articulated as the difference between reflection and critical reflection, with the former privileging private

cognition and problem-solving (related to the notion of 'critical *thinking*'), and the latter focusing on a wider range of relational and institutional issues, including power and politics (Reynolds, 1998) and the containment of the anxieties generated by making these visible (Vince, 2002). Such relational definitions have meant that many of the tools designed to foster critical reflection both in the classroom and in organisational life more generally are similarly relational; for instance, peer consultancy groups, role analysis groups, and communities of practice (Vince, 2002), reflexive conversations and storytelling (Gray, 2007), and peer learning and coaching approaches (Boud, 2001; Parker et al., 2008).

Reynolds and Vince (2004) suggest that more work is needed to deconstruct the processes of critical reflection so that we can more fully grasp their potential to influence organisational life. We think this is important not just from a theoretical perspective but also from a practical perspective, because one of the most important issues with critical reflection is that students appear to struggle with it (Gray, 2007; Mingers, 2000; Norris, 1985). As Bailin et al. (1999) suggest, as soon as we try to operationalise and make it concrete, any agreement amongst scholars and teachers seems to evaporate, thereby making it extremely difficult to explain to our students what we require of them. This is probably exacerbated by the alienating effects of the language of emancipation and resistance within a business school context, and a fear that being critical of organisations will lose sight of managers' accomplishments (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Reynolds, 1998). Once we have gone past basic statements such as 'critical reflection is not the same as criticism, i.e., finding fault', we often struggle to articulate what it is we want our students to do. In our own experience, we have found that students often interpret criticality as the requirement (or opportunity) to give their own opinion, which tends to result in ungrounded assertions and a certain disdain for theory.

### **The Narcissism of Critical Reflection**

Beyond issues of inconsistent definition and poor or half-hearted explanation, we think there is another reason for our students' troubles with critical reflection. We propose that undermining critical reflection is a form of narcissism, incorporating a strong but subtle power dynamic. The broad concept of narcissism is, of course,

very familiar in everyday as well as academic discourse. Within management and organization studies, narcissism has been explored extensively, particularly in relation to leadership (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008). Narcissism tends to be associated with crises and failures of corporate life (Lasch, 1979; Schwartz, 1990), although its positive features of risk-taking, ambition and vision have also been considered (Maccoby, 2000). Within the literature on learning, narcissism features in critiques of critical reflection (Papastephanou, 2004), reflective learning (Bengtsson, 1995), and the question of whether narcissistic teachers are responsible for the particularly strong narcissistic tendencies amongst business and management students (Bergman et al., 2010; Westerman et al., 2012).

Indeed, the concept of narcissism is perhaps in danger of becoming too useful. If it has become too protean, too flexible, it may have lost some of its power to disturb or move us, morphing into something able “to match nearly anything we like or dislike about ourselves and our culture... responding to any projection, wish and desire” (Gabriel, 2014:19). We are mindful of this risk, and hence base our own exploration of narcissism on a close textual analysis of a particular literary version of the myth, rather than an everyday understanding of narcissism as vanity and self-obsession (or indeed, a specifically psychoanalytic conceptualisation of narcissism in relation to the ego ideal; or a definition based on the APA construct of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder).

So, in this paper we use a literary interpretation of narcissism to problematise the processes of critical reflection, attempting to tease out those aspects that seem to make critical reflection so challenging for our students. The paper is structured as follows. First, we present the myth as the basis of our analysis. We then extract the key themes from our interpretation of the myth and apply them to a theoretical discussion of critical reflection, and specifically, the relationship between reflection and critical reflection. Based on this, we then propose practical suggestions for the classroom, grounding these principally in the practices of peer learning and coaching, but also suggesting a broader relevance for the teaching and role-modelling of leadership.

## OVID'S NARCISSUS

For this analysis, we turn to the version written by Ovid, a Roman poet writing around the time of the birth of Christ. Ovid is considered a modern, 'psychological' poet, whose *Metamorphoses*, in particular, have inspired recent reflections in organization studies on topics including leadership (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008); organizational change (Starr-Glass, 2002); power (Winstanley, 2004); and consumer behaviour (Arndt et al., 2004).

Ovid is the poet of the clever twist. His *metamorphoses* are not just the transformations from human to animal, animal to human, mortal to immortal, immortal to mortal, and so on. They are also the transformations from one way of seeing something to another. The tensions and paradoxes that emerge with such transformations of perspective are highlighted and explored through Ovid's use of verbal tricks and surprises, especially his unusual combinations of story elements and use of words that convey more than one meaning. His wordplay is classical antiquity's equivalent of 'camping is intense' or 'never trust atoms, they make up everything', where the humour, the pathos and the politics derive from the juxtaposition of different ideas. Ovid is a poet who exposes and challenges our assumptions; he is thus a powerful classical mentor for an exploration of critical reflection.

## Looking Without Seeing

Ovid first introduces us to Narcissus as a baby, when his mother consults the seer Tiresias about the prospects for his future. Tiresias predicts that Narcissus will lead a long and healthy life, as long as he does not come to know himself. Since Tiresias is blind and yet all-seeing, we get a sense that there will be an important interplay between looking and really seeing in this story.

We next see Narcissus as an exquisitely handsome and accomplished young man. He is desired by many, but is cruel and disdainful of his suitors' advances, thinking himself far too good for any of them. Finally, Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, intervenes to punish him for his arrogance by subjecting him to a special kind of torment. One day, Narcissus goes hunting and comes across a beautiful pool of water. He gazes into the water and is immediately entranced:

*As he quenched his thirst for water, a different thirst stole over him.  
He was struck by a bolt, overwhelmed by the reflected vision.  
He fell in love with an empty hope, a shadow mistaken for something real...  
...He knows not what he is seeing; but what he sees excites him.  
His mistake both deceives and arouses his senses.  
(Lines 415-417 and 430-431 <sup>1</sup>)*

Narcissus gazes at his own reflection in the water and is oblivious to everything around him, including, crucially, his own collusion in the creation of the reflection. In reference to Tiresias' prediction, he does not yet 'know himself'. As Elsner (2007) elaborates, this unconscious narcissism combines and depends on a twin deception - that the image is of another person and that it is of something real. Narcissus looks, but what he does not see is that the 'work' is both *of/about* him and *by* him.

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<sup>1</sup> All passages from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book 3, have been translated from the Latin by the first author. See Ovid (2004a) for the most recently edited edition of the original text, and Ovid (2004b) for an accessible translation of the whole work.



## The Deceptions of Familiarity and Similarity

Narcissus falls in love with his reflection precisely because it is so *like* him. Ovid develops a clever word play around this idea, drawing on the double meaning of the Latin *simulacrum* as both similarity and deceptiveness (Hardie, 2002). In a shift of voice, the poet addresses Narcissus directly to warn him of the deceptions of the resemblance:

*You trusting fool! How futile to pursue the trickery of your likeness!  
You will never grasp it. If you turn away, you will lose what you love.  
That shape you see is just a reflection, just a trace, just an echo.  
It is nothing in itself.  
(Lines 432-435)*

But Narcissus pays no heed. If anything, his sensing of similarity only heightens his obsession. He addresses his reflection, using the points of similarity to bond them:

*Your familiar, friendly face offers me hope. When my arms  
Reach out to embrace you, you reach out too.  
I smile at you, and you smile back at me.  
My tears are matched by your tears.  
You nod at me, and we seem to agree!  
Indeed, your lips softly repeat my words.  
(Lines 457-462)*

The more the image resembles him, the more the fires of passion burn. The familiarity and similarity fuel his error and his infatuation, and he sees harmony and compatibility in what in reality is only mirroring and replication.

## The Appropriation of Meaning

Narcissus is besotted with the harmony between himself and the world of his reflection. Disharmony arrives, however, in the shape of Echo, whose involvement in Narcissus' story may well be original to Ovid, for they had not been linked in

earlier Greek versions of either myth (Hardie, 2002). Echo is a nymph who incurs the wrath of Juno, because her chattering distracts Juno whilst her husband Jupiter dallies with the other nymphs. Echo is punished by being condemned to repeat the words at the end of others' sentences. When she falls in love with Narcissus, therefore, she cannot use her own words to try to woo him, she can only use his. Given Narcissus' arrogance, this does not initially pose a problem because, of course, the similarity between his expressions and hers intrigues rather than repels him. However, when she tries to engage with him in person, Narcissus recoils in horror:

*He cannot get a way fast enough! 'Hands off!', he cries.*

*'I would rather die than let you touch me!'*

*To which Echo can only reply, 'touch me!'*

*(Lines 390-392)*

Here we see another instance of the deceptions of similarity. Narcissus' and Echo's words are identical, but their meanings are clearly different. Both utterances convey the intentions and wishes of the speaker but, as Hardie (2002:165) puts it, "in typical Ovidian fashion, difference slips into the gap between a word and its repetition". There is a crucial difference between Narcissus' (do not under any circumstances) 'touch me' and Echo's plea of (please, *please*) 'touch me'. But he has seized the meaning of these words, and only his version now has the power to influence events. Indeed, his version will prove prescient, whereas hers is destined never to be fulfilled.

In appropriating meaning, Narcissus diminishes Echo. Ovid plays with the double meaning of the Latin word *imago* as both echo and reflection, which suggests that both auditory and visual senses are at play (Hardie, 2002). But the word *imago* has a third meaning - ghost. In his confusion between the real and the constructed, between his passion for what he can control and his fear of what he cannot, Narcissus turns Echo into a ghost. Scorned and inconsolable, Echo retreats into the forest. Gradually her flesh withers away, her bones are transformed to stone, and all that remains to this day is the voice...

## The Reflexive Revelation

In the pivotal moment of Ovid's poem, Narcissus sees his mistake. His growing awareness of the similarity between himself and the image reflected in the water moves him towards an understanding of his own role in its construction. As he reflects on the mirroring of appearance and expression, he comes to see that they are more than just *similar*, they are the *same*:

*I am you and you are me! I see that now, and am no longer  
Deceived by the ghost of my reflection! I am the cause  
Of my own fire - both lover and loved. What can I do?  
Should I desire or be desired? Where does my passion go from here?  
Everything I want I already have!*  
(Lines 463-466)

Narcissus moves from unconscious to conscious engagement, from a naïve absorption in reflection to a more detached, more knowing stance. This, too, is one of those special Ovidian twists, for it is likely that Ovid is combining two normally distinct versions of the story for the first time; one in which Narcissus does not realise that the boy he loves is himself, and another in which the self-love and self-focus are conscious and deliberate (Hardie, 2002).

But Narcissus' new-found consciousness of his error does not stop him worshipping what he sees. He now knows he is looking at himself, but this does not stop him gazing in both agony and ecstasy. Both unconscious and conscious reflection are intolerable, trapping him in a deadly reflexive impasse (Tomkins, 2011). Despite realising that the object is his own creation, he can neither resist the enticement of similarity nor open himself up to the potential disruption of difference, a real Other. Consumed by his passion, but incapable of living with the realities of its construction, he withers and dies. His appropriation of the meaning of 'touch me' has brought about the other part of his statement, 'I would rather die'.

## A JOURNEY FROM REFLECTION TO CRITICAL REFLECTION

Our interpretation has focused on the deceptiveness of familiarity and its connection with the appropriation of meaning. We propose that this is a risk inherent in reflection, and that Narcissus' movement - his metamorphosis - from unconsciousness to consciousness of this risk can be seen as a journey from reflection to critical reflection. This allows us to see reflection and critical reflection not as two separate categories of activity (one individual/psychological, the other relational/political), but rather, as so intimately interrelated that critical reflection can be understood as a modification of - a reflexive awareness of - reflection.

### Reflection: The Dynamics of Unconscious Power

Narcissus' initially naïve reflection involves confusing self and other, constructed and real, same and similar (Elsner, 2007; Tomkins, 2011). Narcissus loves what he sees because he recognises something in or about it. In this sense, the myth can be read as a paradigm for the complexities of recognition, and the way in which our everyday interpretation of the world relies on a sense of familiarity. Being able to match what we see or hear against something in the memory banks is vital for our continuity and coherence of selfhood and is thought to be a crucial aspect of our evolutionary heritage (Warnock, 1987). Without recognition - that sense of 'ok, it is one of *those*' - we would have to interpret everything as if we were seeing it for the first time. Recognition helps us to sift through the plethora of sensory and perceptual stimuli that bombard us, and prioritise amongst them in order to direct our attention appropriately.

But Narcissus' error contains a crucial warning about the risk of false recognition. When we read, listen to and consider other people's ideas, we rely on a sense of familiarity for reassurance that we will be able to understand and connect with them. We retrieve cues and clues from the memory of our *equivalent* engagement with the ideas being presented, and we process and evaluate them according to our own filters and frameworks. As the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty suggests, this is an inevitable feature of the subjectivity of perception; "since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all

vision... [this relates to] a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:139). When I read your work, I read it through my eyes - literally as well as metaphorically. Therefore, at least part of what I read is mine. No wonder it feels familiar, it is (at least partially) mine! So, if we are to heed Ovid, the more familiar something feels, the more cautious we should be about the nature of its construction.

Narcissus' feelings of love are infused with a sense of his own power and influence. He thinks that his reflection is following his lead; when he smiles, his reflection smiles back; when he cries, his reflection weeps too. This is a very subtle kind of self-deception. Narcissus' worldview not only feels coherent to him, it gets its coherence from its apparent compatibility with, and incorporation of, the worldview of the Other. This is power not of the Machiavellian kind, but of the kind which feels like love, like connection, like engagement, like consultation. But although it might *feel* like love, its effect is to insulate us from the possibility of otherness, in other words, it compromises critical reflection. The lure of familiarity and the confidence it inspires blind us to the possibility and implications of other meanings.

Seeing reflection as the site of unconscious narcissism casts an interesting light on the notion of difference. As Reynolds and Trehan (2003) suggest, difference has become a sort of shibboleth in management education, especially anything professing a 'critical' pedagogy. Difference is often conceptualised in structural, categorical terms, such as gender, ethnicity and age, and features prominently in conversations about diversity, both in the seminar room and in organisations (Boud, 2001; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000). Viewed through our prism of narcissism, difference relates not just to such overt biographical categorisations, but also to the very way in which we all intuitively approach the world, seeking coherence and reassurance - and deriving a sense of control - from familiarity. Thus, our view of the unconscious narcissism of reflection suggests that the dynamics of difference are not merely hidden from public view (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003), they are often hidden from private view, too.

## Critical Reflection: The Dynamics of Conscious Reflexivity

So, the risks of reflection involve the lure of familiarity and false recognition. This is the error of thinking that my worldview incorporates the view of the Other, and not realising that its very appeal lies in the fact that it is at least partially mine. So, the question becomes how to challenge this framing? How do we break out of the cycle of self-deception with its subtle power and its significant implications? How do we move from reflection to critical reflection?

Awareness of his influence over his construction is the fatal blow for Ovid's Narcissus. For us, however, such a reflexive revelation may be painful, perhaps embarrassing, but it need not be a crisis. We may be prone to Narcissus' unconscious self-absorption, more inclined to look rather than really see, but we do not have to mirror his fate. We can surely learn to cope with the fact that, when we approach a piece of work, our interpretative gaze is capable *both* of seeing it as if it were ours - whether by us or about us, that twin deception (Elsner, 2007) - *and* of reaching beyond that to try to see or imagine what the other person might be trying to say - please, *please* touch me!

Becoming aware of our ability - perhaps our natural tendency - to misinterpret the filter we impose on our version of events seems to be fundamental to critical reflection. Such a definition dovetails with discussions of reflexivity as engagement with multiple sources and qualities of knowledge, for instance, those which focus on the interplay and interconnectedness of infra and meta engagement (Latour, 1988); mundane and referential understanding (Pollner, 1991); living forwards and reflecting backwards (Weick, 2002); and, most interestingly for our analysis, similarity and difference (Woolgar, 1988). These are all articulations of reflexivity which encourage a sensibility to the multiple ways in which we construct and inflect our knowledge of the world (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010).

However, our view of critical reflection is more than a call for an intellectual commitment to seeing things from multiple standpoints or considering arguments from different quarters. It is more than just an awareness of the complexities of knowledge construction; it involves *living* with these complexities. Narcissus' journey

speaks not only to the epistemology, but also to the *ethics* of knowledge construction (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2014). Ultimately, Narcissus' failure is an ethical one; he is incapable and/or unwilling to live the sort of life which acknowledges the limitations of his own power, the presence and occasional unfathomability of others, and his commitments and responsibilities towards those others. Narcissus cannot handle critical reflection, but this is not because he cannot understand what has happened, but rather, because he is unable or unwilling to live with its implications. Instead of having the power to control others, Narcissus is forced to confront the need to control himself, and this is something he refuses to do.

Thus, Narcissus' journey from unconscious reflection to conscious critical reflection reveals a number of power positions. It suggests that the power that critical reflection is supposed to reveal (Reynolds, 1998; Rigg and Trehan, 2008; Vince, 2002) includes the power within reflection itself. Engagement in reflection is not just *about* power, it *is* power. It is the power to control through the subjectivity of the gaze, and it is sustained not only through the confidence and certainty brought about by familiarity, but also by the deceptive feelings of love and connection. Power is in the gaze - *in here* - not just in the organisation or the system - *out there*.

For us, therefore, the tale of Narcissus reveals the political-in-the-personal - and/or the personal-in-the-political. This is why we seek to soften some of the distinctions made in the literature between reflection as an individual, psychological activity and critical reflection as a political, organizing process (Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002). In our view, they are intimately interconnected; both involve the reflecting and reflected self, both involve power, and both have implications for how we live our lives and engage with other people.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

There are a number of implications of this analysis for management learning. First and foremost, we think our interpretation of narcissism can help students to understand what may be required when we ask for 'critical reflection'. We find it useful to unpack the processes of reflection to expose the things that encourage narcissism (the lure of false recognition and too comfortable an assumption of consensus over meaning) and those that will support the development of reflection into critical reflection (awareness of the subjectivity and contingency of knowledge claims, and the complexities of feelings of control). We believe there is value even in such simple messages as the need *just to pause* to check whether people mean the same thing when they use the same word, or before claiming, 'I know *exactly* what you mean'. In this way, critical reflection comes alive for students as a scepticism towards familiarity, making definitions and explanations more concrete and more accessible.

The complexities of reflection are relevant whenever students are asked to review something, both when they are considering their own work and when they are reviewing the work of others. When we evaluate any piece of work, we are probably drawing on a mixture of criteria, both public and private. The public criteria include standards of 'best practice', such as whether a report has an executive summary or a presentation has a logical flow. But the private criteria seem to concern the issue of *resonance* (Finlay and Evans, 2009), which we suggest relates to issues of familiarity and recognition. Thus, we think an interesting and important question for students is '*why* is this resonating with me?', especially when one student is reviewing the work of another. If another person's work is resonating with us, is this because it is, in fact, something we have seen, said or thought ourselves? How else do we ever assess other people's ideas, except through considering what their nearest equivalents in our own mental models look and feel like? But at what point do they stop being similar and start being the same?

These suggestions would seem to have particular relevance for peer learning approaches (Boud, 2001), and related practices of peer coaching (Parker et al., 2008), peer mentoring (Kram and Hall, 1989) and peer assessment (Brutus and



Donia, 2010), especially in connection with the process of giving feedback. Peer learning is considered especially suited to fostering critical reflection in the classroom, with some suggesting that it is more effective at developing reflective skills than even the best-planned and most skilfully executed teacher interventions (Boud and Walker, 1998; Smith and Hatton, 1993).

On the surface, peer learning appears to be a more democratic form of learning than traditional pedagogies, providing seemingly fertile ground for multiple views and viewpoints to be expressed, challenged and refined, and for development to take priority over evaluation (Parker et al., 2008). However, the narcissism of reflection suggests that there is no such thing as a non-evaluative peer relationship. Whenever we engage with another person's work or ideas, we bring our own frame of reference into play, with its implicit grounding in familiarity. Thus, classroom practices such as peer coaching may be based on reciprocity and mutual respect, and may even achieve mutual benefit, but they are not non-evaluative. As Parker et al. (2008) suggest, there is a tension involved in trying to engage authentically with the feelings and personal meanings of the peer's life-world, juxtaposing these with our own feelings and personal meanings. We suggest that this tension should not be under-estimated, nor assumed to be something that only emotionally immature students will experience. There is a fundamental narcissism in *all* of our reflections, and hence *all* of our experiences of and with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

For Boud (2001), the key challenge for peer learning is the question of how we learn from people with whom we do not identify. This is a question being asked more and more frequently with the internationalisation of business schools, where learning groups are increasingly made up of students from different cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages, and holding different implicit and explicit models of the learning experience. We want to turn this question on its head and suggest that an equally significant issue for peer learning is how we learn from people with whom we identify too easily. As we have suggested, such ease of identification and connection suggest a narcissism of non-critical reflection, leading to an ever-greater conviction in, and adherence to, existing ideas rather than the development of new ones.

These reflections suggest that there are some subtle power dynamics in peer learning which should be exposed if peer learning is to achieve its desired outcomes. At the very least, students would probably benefit from more detailed guidance and support for how to give feedback and what reference models are being invoked in the process. It also strikes us that students should be given more support to *receive* feedback, too, given the complexities of the processes we have described and the hurt that they can cause. Thus, although peer learning has become popular as a way of handling larger class sizes (Boud, 2001), there is an irony that it needs strong facilitation to make it effective. If peer learning is to support a critical reflection capable of exposing power dynamics in organisations, it needs to be closely attuned to the power dynamics in its midst (Gordon and Connor, 2001).

Narcissus' crisis - his reflexive impasse - lies in the tension between the power to control others and the power to control self. The lessons that we have extrapolated from his story support the idea of management learning as 'reflective engagement', that is, the personalisation of learning within an inherently relational context (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010; Petriglieri et al., 2011). A curriculum designed to support this sort of personalised reflection involves encouraging a self-awareness which necessarily incorporates an appreciation of one's effect on others. For Petriglieri et al. (2011), this sort of relational self-awareness is accompanied by a self-management which involves being able to judge when to express oneself and when to hold back, especially in relation to reactions and interpretations which come quickly. This is explicitly linked to the giving and receiving of feedback, both in the classroom and in organisational life generally. There are parallels between their view of management learning as 'reflective engagement' and our view of the journey from unconscious narcissism to critical reflection. In both cases, there is a need to identify and try to avoid the lure of the familiar, to challenge the way one has previously thought or acted, and to engage seriously in the possibility that things could be different. Both see selfhood not in terms of solipsistic autonomy, but as a self-awareness and self-control, grounded in both ethics and relationality.

Giving feedback is considered a crucial element of leadership (Brutus and Donia, 2010; Petriglieri et al., 2011), and increasingly thought to be developmental for the giver as much as the receiver (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Giving feedback based on a

genuine attempt to engage with the Other rather than rely on the narcissistic comforts of familiarity casts leadership in terms of a concern for one's presence in the world (Ciulla, 2009). This kind of leadership requires a commitment to engaging in intersubjective, rather than narcissistic, recognition. The Other will inevitably have a different viewpoint to our own - not necessarily incompatible, merely different (Zahavi, 2001). Engaging authentically in intersubjectivity involves acknowledging this difference and managing its accompanying disruptions and anxieties; in other words, it requires a leadership of self. In this sense, the ethics of critical reflection connect with theories of self-leadership (Neck and Houghton, 2006), and with leadership as reflection (Zundel, 2012) and contemplation (Case et al., 2012).

These are not just ideas that we can teach; they are also things that we should be attempting to role-model. If we want to re-orientate our educational offerings to nurture leaders who are sensitive to their presence in the world and their influence on others, then we should be attentive to the things that might hamper these in our own reflections, too. Indeed, we wonder whether our own processes of peer review in academia are all too often unconsciously narcissistic; that we, too, can deceive ourselves that the echoes we hear around us are signs of agreement and compatibility, rather than mirroring or subservience. When we review the work of others, do we see it so much through the filters of our own perception that we morph into a mode of appropriation, effectively judging the work as if it were ours? Such reflections dovetail with the burgeoning literature which criticises the business of academic review, including in this journal (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Bedeian, 2004; Raelin, 2008).

We mention this connection with the business of academia, because it emphasises the crux of our argument, namely that the power and the errors of reflection are often very close to home. Critical reflection is therefore much harder than we sometimes imply, because it can involve some uncomfortable home truths. This may be why the narcissism of reflection belongs to the category of 'Questions Business Schools Don't Ask'. As Ford et al. (2010) suggest, perhaps we have a sneaking suspicion that if business schools are insufficiently 'critical', it is because we are not being sufficiently 'critical' ourselves. Since critical reflection is such an obviously 'good thing' for management learning, anything that gets in its way is bound to feel like a

personal failing, a character flaw which reveals one's closet instrumentalism or one's adherence to old-fashioned methods. Critical reflection both concerns and reveals the power in ourselves - both its presence and its limitations. This seems much more unsettling to deal with than the power 'out there' in the organisations we chastise. But if critical reflection requires coming to terms with the political-in-the-personal, surely we will be better able to teach and inspire our students if we try to practise what we preach.

## **FINAL REFLECTIONS**

We have offered an interpretation of Ovid's myth of Narcissus as a way of conceptualising a journey from reflection to critical reflection. Our aim has not been to propose a definitive rival to existing models of critical reflection, so much as to present a novel framing of some of the issues and challenges involved. The themes of looking versus seeing; the twin deceptions of real/constructed and self/Other; the inherent trickery of familiarity and false recognition; the gap between a word and its meanings; the interplay between conscious and unconscious awareness of one's reflexive influence; and the importance of openness to otherness - these ideas emerge from our interpretation of the myth to form our proposition for a critical reflection that might curb our basic narcissistic impulses. These themes are intimately concerned with power, influence and control over both self and Other(s), and with the responsibilities that accompany them. Thus, our view of critical reflection connects with an ethical concern for our presence in the world.

In presenting an analysis of an ancient poem to explore issues relating to contemporary management learning, we have sought to juxtapose the familiar with the unfamiliar. We have drawn attention to the power which is close to home by engaging with a myth from a world which is remote to us. We hope we have persuaded readers that Ovid's insights into subjectivity and intersubjectivity are profound; and that as business school leaders and educators, we have much to gain from his wisdom. It is Ovid who forces Narcissus to confront Echo - a classic example of Gabriel's (2003) disorganised Other. When she hurls herself at Narcissus in a state of manic exuberance is it any wonder that he erects all his

defences against her to retain his sense of mastery of the world? Is it any surprise, therefore, that any of us, when faced by the mania of organisational life, might revert to the comfort of the familiar rather than risk engaging with difference? After all, critical reflection can trigger feelings of fear, anxiety and the loss of coherence of identity (Gray, 2007; Reynolds, 1998). But the alternative to critical reflection may be Narcissus' eventual fate. Although Echo is horribly diminished by what happens, it is Narcissus who dies. On earth, he is metamorphosed into the narcissus flower, a magnificent white bloom with a glorious golden crown. But in the underworld, he is condemned to stare forever at his image in the waters of hell.

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